

June 29, 2005

Earlier (longer) draft of LA Times opinion piece for July 3, 2005

It was with a sense of familiarity, but not nostalgia, that I heard President Bush explain on June 28 why we must stay the course in Iraq, for as long as it takes. I had heard virtually all of his themes before, almost word for word, in speeches delivered by three presidents I had worked for: John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon. Not with pride, I recognized that I had proposed some of those very words myself.

That shouldn't have surprised me. In July of 1965, drafting a speech on Vietnam for Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, I had the same task as Bush's speechwriters in June 2005: how to rationalize and motivate continued public support for a hopelessly stalemated, unnecessary war our president had lied us into.

Looking back on my draft, I find I used the word "terrorist" about our adversaries even more than Bush did in this particular speech. Like Bush's advisors, too, I felt the need at that juncture for a global threat to explain the scale of effort we were embarking on; for that role, I felt "China" was better suited as our "real" adversary than Ho Chi Minh, just as Bush now prefers to focus on Al Qaeda as our enemy in Iraq rather than Iraqi nationalists. [[Bush June 28: They are trying to shake our will in Iraq—just as they [sic] tried to shake our will on Sept. 11, 2001."]

This particular speech was not delivered then—although my draft, including all the words below, had been approved for delivery, not only by McNamara but by McGeorge Bundy and Dean Rusk-- because it was a clarion call for mobilizing the reserves to support an open-ended escalation of troops. (The counterpart now would be to reinstitute the draft). President Johnson chose instead at that time to make his own, rather off-hand, statement at a press conference, because he wanted to conceal, and lie about, what his military advisors were really telling him was necessary to succeed.ⁱ

But the note that was particularly reminiscent to me in Bush's speech Tuesday was what the New York Times described as "a call for stoicism and endurance, during what Mr. Bush termed, for the second time in a week, 'time of testing.'" "We have more work to do, and there will be tough moments that test America's resolve..."

This theme recalled for me the almost identical climactic appeal of my 1965 draft, a passage that, for reasons that will be evident, I have never chosen to reproduce before. I ended my argument by painting a picture of Communist China [note to White House speechwriters: substitute for China or Peking: Al Qaeda, or perhaps later, Iran, or still later, China again] as "an opponent that views international politics as a whole as a vast guerrilla struggle, in which a stronger enemy's weak points are to be found and patiently exploited. A Communist world dominated by Peking, they know, lies a long way off. But the way to it is the guerrilla's way, intimidating, ambushing, demoralizing and weakening those who would uphold an alternative world order.

"The Peking leaders believe that a succession of defeats inflicted at points of an enemy's weakness, no matter how great his initial superiority, will gradually erode his strength, his support and his morale and eventually reduce him to absolute inferiority. It

is a strategy that worked for them in their own revolution, and has succeeded in other contests. It demands, above patience; and a long-term confidence based on contempt for the patience, the will and resolution of the opponent. The Peking leadership has both.

“We are being tested. In blunt terms: have we the guts, the grit, the determination to stick with a frustrating, bloody, difficult course as long as it takes to see it through without getting bored or despairing, without losing sight of all our objectives, without being lured by false promises of short-cuts? The Asian Communists are sure that we have not. [Bush: our adversaries “believe that free societies are essentially corrupt and decadent, and with a few hard blows they can force us to retreat.”]

“That is why they are not interested in discussions of a settlement; to achieve total victory, they believe, they need only wait for us to quit. And the Chinese Communists, far more even than Hanoi, want a total victory in this confrontation. [Bush, June 28, citing Osama Bin Laden: “‘this third world war’ ...now raging in Iraq...will end ‘in victory and glory or misery and humiliation.’”] They are concerned with bigger stakes than the control of South Vietnam; in the worldwide guerrilla struggle they see themselves conducting against the United States, South Vietnam itself is to be our Dien Bien Phu.

“The only question is how long it will take. Two years? Three years? How long will it be, they ask their listeners sardonically, before the U.S. tires of its wearisome task, how long will it maintain the efforts it has pledged?”

Bush's speechwriters, facing this question from the other side—how long must the American public support American troops as they kill and die in Iraq, to meet this particular test of resolve?—provide the same workmanlike evasions that served Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon: “as long as it takes (and not a day longer)...until the fight is won...”

I no longer commend my own proposed response to that question in July 1965, which drew on a famous riposte by Adlai Stevenson (who had died a week earlier) during the Cuban Missile Crisis:

“There is only one answer for us to give. It was made for us three years ago, by an American statesman whose death the world mourns this month, in the midst of another crisis that tested our resolution.

“‘Till hell freezes over.’”ⁱⁱ

Ah, me. When I published a collection of my official writings in Papers on the War in 1972—while I was on trial for releasing the Pentagon Papers--I didn't include this effort. As I wrote then, I wasn't presenting everything I'd done or written as an official, not being a masochist; the limitations of my best things, the ones I cited, were clear enough. In 1972 the Vietnam war, my “test” of American patience, was still going on. The hell we had fueled in Vietnam had not cooled, at all, seven years after I wrote that speech, and I didn't like to re-read it myself, let alone let anyone else see it.

It doesn't feel any better to hear similar words from yet another president forty years on, nor will they read any better to his own present speechwriters seven years from now. But the human pain they foretell will not be mainly theirs.